SYMS COVINGTON, AN ASSOCIATE OF CHARLES DARWIN

[By Miss Jean McIntyre, of Brigalow, Q.]
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People today who accept the theory of the Evolution of life cannot credit or realise the impact this startling new idea had during the latter part of the last century on the minds of so many thoughtful and really good-living individuals.

Charles Darwin (1809-1882), who had his "Origin of Species" published in 1859, brought to the notice of the British public an entirely new viewpoint on how life, human and otherwise, began. At first Darwin only propounded his theory but later—after further studies—he believed it to be the answer to so many problems.

Many Church authorities were indignant that he should dare to flout long-established beliefs. In time, as we know, Darwin's theory, with some modifications, was upheld.

But I have not come here tonight to labour this theme. I am perhaps one of the fortunate ones who can trace my ancestry back to a man who came to Australia to settle in 1840. His name was Syms Covington, and we know of him and some of his life because from 1831 to 1836 he travelled round the world with Charles Darwin in His Majesty's ship, the *Beagle*.

SYMS COVINGTON—1813-1861

At first because of his youth Syms was listed as "Cabin Boy", but Darwin found in him a person of promise and he eventually accompanied Darwin when that individual landed on various coastlines. We are told that he became Darwin's assistant in the research into marine life.

They visited Rio de Janiero, Montevideo, Tierra del Fuego, and Valparaiso. Quite often Darwin was able to make many lone and exciting journeys inland in search of specimens.

Covington got on well with Darwin, and *vice versa*. Darwin taught his "Man Friday" to shoot and skin birds as well as getting him to do copying work.

Syms—he was my great-grandfather—married Eliza Twyford at Stroud, near Port Stephens (N.S.W.) on 12

August 1841, the officiating clergyman being the Rev. W. M. Cowper.

At the invitation of a Mr. Lloyd he went to settle at Pambula, on the south coast of New South Wales, in 1844, when his first son—also called Syms—was two years old.

He became the second Postmaster at Pambula, in 1854. He had other satisfactory interests. One of Darwin's letters mentions that Syms in 1855 had land and house-letting for £83 per annum. A painting of the "beautiful home" he built is in Pambula.

Eight children were born to my great-grandfather, and so far as we can gather the family comprised six sons and two daughters—Syms Junr. (who lived to be an old man of eighty odd), Charles who married in Townsville in 1876, Ernest, unmarried, Walter, Philip and Alfred, all married; and Louisa and Emmaline.

My maternal grandfather was Alfred Simon Covington, the fifth son of the family. He was born in 1852 and died at Toowoomba in 1930.

Louisa married Charles Axam, who was a trader with trading ships plying from the New Hebrides to Sydney. She died in 1905.

LIFE AT PAMBULA

To get back to great-grandfather Syms—so far as we can find out he selected a small area of land. I do not know exactly what he was doing in the years between 1844 when he arrived at Pambula and 1854 when he became Postmaster, but we do know he built a very beautiful house called "The Retreat", and later built the Great Southern Hotel at Eden, still a beautiful building, with a plaque set in the hallway telling its history.

Another anecdote which was recorded I can mention: The American ship *Junior* was burnt in Disaster Bay, close to Twofold Bay. The four mutineers who had murdered the captain and the rest of the crew of the *Junior* got away in the ship's boat and came to Merimbula (the port of Pambula). It was Syms Covington who sent word to the police officer at Twofold Bay in 1854 and helped in the capture of the mutineers. His signature headed the list on the testimonial given to Constable Ballantyne.

Another item of interest: We know that Charles Darwin had given his compass to Syms Covington, and this has been placed in the Mitchell Library, Sydney; also a collection of sketchings and drawings done by my great-grandfather. These items were given to the Library by his son, Syms

Junior, and I have seen the letters, written in a perfect handwriting, expressing thanks for them. An aunt of mine has these letters in her possession.

JOSIAH WEDGEWOOD

Yet another side of the Charles Darwin story is worth interpolating here. The name of Josiah Wedgewood should ring a jingle nearly as much in your ears as that of Darwin. The two were closely related. Surely Charles inherited more Wedgewood characteristics than that of the Darwins. Anyway, only for his uncle Wedgewood he might never have had the opportunity to have the world trip. His own father did not then rate his son's qualities very high, and said: "If you can find one single person of sense who advises your going on this journey, I will consent."

Charles rushed twenty miles across country to his uncle Wedgewood, who was, of all things, a student of noses. Charles had a very prominent one.

"With such a nose," Wedgewood said, "you ought to do something, so I'll back the proposal." So Charles went.

To take this on a bit further, the captain of the vessel was also a student of noses. When he saw Darwin he grumbled: "With a nose like that you'll never do anything." But Uncle Wedgewood was right. The first Wedgewood we know was, like Darwin, a very persistent man. With no money or help he worked until he learned how to turn out beautiful chinaware. Thus he drove Delftware forever from England and captured the market. Before Josiah Wedgewood's day the English turned out a very rough class of earthenware which was hawked about for sale in baskets.

ISLAND ADVENTURES

However, returning to Sym Covington's cordial friendship with Darwin and the voyage of the *Beagle*:

In 1833, during the course of the journey, Charles Darwin wrote: "I shall now make a fine collection of birds and quadrupeds."

It is considered by many that Covington must have been of material help to him.

On this voyage (1831-1836) the great man began making up his mind about the theory of evolution.

At one stage they encountered revolution and had trouble getting out. In 1835 they weren't very far from where a serious earthquake occurred. The Galapagos Islands near the Equator were next reached. For a week Darwin, Cov-

ington, Bynoe and the assistant surgeon camped on James Island. There they saw huge tortoises and marine and land lizards several feet long.

They visited Tahiti and from there went to the lovely Bay of Islands, North Island, New Zealand. Then to Australia, first to Sydney and Hobart and then across to Western Australia.

Darwin often suffered severely from sea-sickness, and Syms proved to be the "right man in the right place."

Owing to research and the publication of a book on Syms Covington by the New South Wales Imlay District Historical Society, we know more of Syms' activities during the journey and after it was over. Seemingly he continued to help Darwin until 1839 when he must then have decided to emigrate to Australia in 1840. For a time after his arrival in Australia, before going to Pambula to live, he was employed as a clerk at a coal depot in Sydney.

At Pambula, besides his other activities, he collected barnacles from the seaside for Darwin, and this common interest was frequently mentioned in the long correspondence that developed between the two men.

The letters which Darwin wrote, and many of which were reproduced in the now-defunct *Sydney Mail*, show what a kindly man he was, dearly loved by his many children. He was interested in Syms' doings and commented on minor matters, was pleased to hear that his erstwhile secretary was doing well, and believed that because of his children Syms had acted wisely in leaving England, where opportunities were less favourable.

THE DARWIN LETTERS

The following are extracts from some of those letters, covering a long period of years, which Darwin wrote to Syms Covington. They were all written from Down Bromley or Down Farnborough, in Kent:

7 October 1843.

Dear Covington,

Your new ear trumpet has gone by the ship *Sultana*. I was not able to send it sooner. You must accept it as a present from me. I presume you will have to pay a trifle for carriage . . . I am yet at work with the materials collected during the voyage. My coral-reef little book has been published for a year—the subject on which you copied so much M.S. The zoology of the voyage of the *Beagle* is also completed. I have lately heard that the *Beagle* has arrived

safely and sound in the Thames, but I have heard no news of any of the officers . . . With best wishes for your prosperity, which is sure to follow if you continue in your old upright prudent course, believe me, yours very faithfully, C. Darwin.

30 March 1849.

It is now some years since I have heard from you, and I hope you will take the trouble to write to me to tell me how you and your family are going on . . . I have finished my three geological volumes on the voyage of the old *Beagle*, and my journal, which you copied, has come out in a second edition, and has had a very large sale. I am now employed on a large volume, describing the anatomy and all the species of barnacles from all over the world. I do not know whether you live near the sea, but if so I would be very glad if you would collect me any that adhere (small and large) to the coast rocks or to shells or to corals thrown up by gales, and send them to me without cleaning out the animals, and taking care of the bases . . .

23 November 1850.

I received your letter of the 12th of March on the 25th of August, but the box of which you advised me arrived here only yesterday . . . I thank you very sincerely for the great trouble you must have taken in collecting so many specimens. I have received a large number of collections from different places, but never one so rich from one locality. One of the kinds is most curious. It is a new species of a genus of which only one specimen is known to exist in the world, and it is in the British Museum. I see that you are one of those very rare few who will work as hard for a friend when several thousand miles apart as when close at hand . . . I am always much interested by your letters, and take a very sincere pleasure in hearing how you get on. You have an immense, incalculable advantage in living in a country in which your children are sure to get on if industrious. I assure you that, though I am a rich man, when I think of the future I very often ardently wish I was settled in one of our Colonies, for I now have four sons (seven children in all, and more coming) and what on earth to bring them up to I do not know . . . Many people think that Californian gold will half ruin all those who live on the interest of accumulated gold or capital, and if that does happen I will certainly emigrate. Whenever you write again, tell me how far you think a gentleman with capital would get on in New South Wales . . .

9 March 1856.

. . . I have finished my book on the barnacles (in which you so kindly helped me with the valuable Australian specimens). I found out much new and curious about them, and the Royal Society gave me their great gold medal (quite a nugget, for it weighs forty sovereigns), chiefly for my discoveries in regard to those shells, which are not perfect shells, but more allied to crabs . . . I am now employed on a work on the variation of species, and for this purpose am studying all about our domestic animals and am keeping alive all kinds of domestic pigeons, poultry, ducks. Have you ever noticed any odd breeds of poultry, or pigeons, or ducks, imported from China, or India, or Pacific Islands? If so, you could not make me a more valuable present than a skin of such. But this, I know, is not at all likely . . .

18 May 1858.

I was glad to get some time ago your letter of the 19th of August, and I should have answered some time ago, but my health has been very indifferent of late, owing to my working too hard. I have for some years been preparing a work which I prepared to publication which I commenced twenty years ago, and for which I sometimes find extracts in your handwriting! This work will be my biggest; it treats on the origin of varieties of our domestic animals and plants, and on the origin of species in a state of nature. I have to discuss every branch of natural history, and the work is beyond my strength and tries me sorely . . . You say you have eight children; we beat you by one. My eldest is between eighteen and nineteen, and is going to Cambridge in October to be educated as a barrister, for want of a better and honester trade. I hope Pambula flourishes; in your last letter you express some fear about the road being turned and trade being thus injured; I hope that this has not happened . . . When you feel inclined I shall always be glad to hear of your progress and well-doing . . .

16 January 1859.

I have got the little book for you, but I have only this minute discovered (for the seal tore by an odd chance at the exact spot) that you asked me to get two copies. But I really think it would be superfluous . . . As to the Aurist, you may rely on it that the man is an advertising humbug. I know plenty of people, and have one relation, very deaf, and everyone in London would know if this man's power of curing is true. My father, who was a very wise man, said he had known numbers who had been injured by Aurists,

and none who had benefited. A common good surgeon can do all that these humbugs can do. I am very sorry to hear about your deafness increasing, it is a very great misfortune for you, but I fear you must look at it as incurable. I am glad to hear that you are doing pretty well; and if you can settle your sons in an agricultural line they will have no cause to complain, for no life can be more healthy or happy.

[It was later in the year in which this last-quoted letter was written—1859—that "The Origin of Species" was published. Covington died in 1861, at the age of forty-eight.]